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Gdynia 1920–1939: Poland’s Gateway to the World

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Abstract:

In 1923, construction of a new Polish seaport began in the small fishermen’s village of Gdynia. By 1926, the village transformed into a port town, and by 1939 it was the biggest and one of the most modern ports on the Baltic Sea, responsible for half of Poland’s foreign exchange. The construction, which was a great investment and considerable strain on the country’s modest resources, was accompanied by intensive enthusiastic propaganda. It was carried out by research institutions (e.g. Baltic Institute) organisations such as Maritime and Colonial League, journalists, writers etc., and it was expressed in exhibitions, public events such as “Holidays of the Sea,” literature, poetry, film and other media. Gdynia became a symbol of Poland’s transformation from nation of farmers to one of seafarers; of modernisation, civilizational development, and even overseas expansion and acquiring colonies. This was summarised with a metaphor of the port being Poland’s “window” or “gateway to the world,” thanks to which it could escape its historically problematic position between Germany and Russia/USSR, and – through a network of trade connections, seafaring, and colonies in Africa and South America – acquire a global presence. This article discusses the rhetoric and realities of Gdynia as the symbol of this ambition in interwar Poland, the contrast and similarities between the image of Gdynia created in contemporary propaganda and publications, and the reality of the actual city.

Introduction

Finally Bond rolled up the sheets and got out his notebook.

“And now we must start working back from the other end, Count.” Bond became inquisitorial, authoritative. “We have your birth date in Gdynia, May 28th, 1908. Yes?”

“Correct.”

“Your parents’ names?”

“Ernst George Blofeld and Maria Stavro Michelopoulos.”

“Also born in Gdynia?”

“Yes.”¹

This dialogue between James Bond and his archnemesis, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, appeared in Ian Fleming’s 1963 novel *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*, the tenth instalment of Bond’s adventures. It gives the reader interesting information about Blofeld’s parents (a Greek mother and a supposedly Polish father) and place of birth: both he and his parents were born in the city of Gdynia. Gdynia is, today, a port city of nearly 250,000 inhabitants,² located in northern Poland, on the Baltic Sea, just north of its better-known neighbour, Gdańsk/Danzig. However, at the time when Blofeld was supposed to be born there, Gdynia was something completely different: a small village of about 900 people,³ situated on the territory of the German Empire and inhabited mostly by ethnic Kashubians, farmers, craftsmen and fishermen.⁴ Put in this context, Fleming’s choice appears quite bizarre. It does, however, reflect what a port city is typically imagined to be: a bustling hub where people of different nationalities meet and mix, a place from which an international arch-villain might start his life and career. In this, it in a way reflects an ambition which would become the guiding light for those who would construct the port city in Gdynia some fifteen years after Blofeld’s fictional birth: the ambition to open up a gateway to the world for the country that also did not yet formally exist in 1908. The interesting thing about Gdynia is that in the process of its construction, decades before Fleming’s invention, the city acquired a mythical status and – as art historian Andrzej Szczerski concluded – there were two Gdynias in the Polish consciousness. One was the physical city, the other – an idea, “built on ambition, hope, and national pride.”⁵ In this paper I discuss these two Gdynias, the processes of their construction, and the relationship between them.

Paradoxically, not only did the city itself not yet exist in 1908, but neither did the conditions that determined its construction: Poland’s independence, its access to the sea and a pressing need to secure its own port. The fate of the small fishing village started to change in 1918, when, following the First World War and the territorial changes sanctioned in the Treaty of Versailles, Poland regained

¹ Ian Fleming, *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 71.

² “Mieszkańcy – demografia,” Oficjalny serwis internetowy miasta Gdynia, 2021, <https://www.um.gdynia.pl/dane-podstawowe,1762/mieszkanicy-demografia,364773>, accessed on 11 I 2022.

³ 895 inhabitants in 1910, A Jelonek, *Liczba ludności miast i osiedli w Polsce w latach 1810–1955*, vol. 5: *Dokumentacja geograficzna* (Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk – Instytut Geografii, 1956), 28.

⁴ Tomasz Rembalski, “Dzieje gdyńskich lotnisk przełomu XIX i XX Wieku,” in: *Arkadia: gdyńskie lotnisko przełomu XIX i XX w.*, eds. Jacek Friedrich, Tomasz Rembalski, and Muzeum Miasta Gdyni (Gdynia: Muzeum Miasta Gdyni, 2014), 29–36.

⁵ Andrzej Szczerski, *Modernizacje: sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918–1939* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010), 246.

independence after 123 years of foreign domination – the so-called partitions. Its borders at the time were quite different from its modern-day successor: Poland reached further into south-east and did not include its present-day north-western territories. It had access to the Baltic Sea, but only through a narrow stretch of land squeezed between German territories. The coastline was 75 km long (excluding the Hel peninsula), with no major port: neither the historical port city of the Polish Crown, Danzig (Gdańsk in Polish), nor the coasts of Courland and Lithuania with their ports (most notably Liepāja and Ventspils), which had been a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before the partitions. Danzig was made a Free City under the oversight of the League of Nations, in customs union with Poland. Poland had the right to use its port, as well as to set up a military depot on Westerplatte peninsula in the harbour. However, this turned out to be problematic in practice, as relations between Poland and the German-dominated Danzig were far from ideal. For example, in 1920, in the middle of the Polish-Bolshevik war, the import of vital military supplies to Poland was blocked in the Danzig port.

Events like this made the Polish authorities realise the importance of controlling a seaport that would not be dependent on relations with other states. Vice-admiral Kazimierz Porębski (1872–1933), the head of the Department of Maritime Affairs in the Ministry of National Defence, tasked a team of experts led by Tadeusz Wenda to select the most suitable spot. Wenda (1863–1948) was an experienced engineer, educated in Warsaw and Saint Petersburg. After surveying the Polish coast, he decided that “the only and best place to build a port is the valley between the so-called Kępa Oksywska and Kamienna Góra. As the village of Gdynia, known to Polish seaside holidaymakers for a long time, was located in this valley, the future port was also named Gdynia.”⁶ Following a memorandum presented by Wenda to the government on 20 June 1920, the construction of the first, temporary port, started. However, right from the start Wenda – who was responsible for the new port’s design – envisaged a far-sighted, ambitious project of a modern port which would compete with the established one in Gdańsk. An act on the construction of the seaport in Gdynia was passed in the Polish Parliament on 23 September 1922, and on 29 April 1923 the port was officially inaugurated. This first port was intended mainly for the use of the navy, with a pier for fishermen. In the summer of the same year the port received its first foreign seagoing vessel, the French steamship *S/S Kentucky*. At first, the construction was financed from the state’s budget, but in 1924 the government welcomed foreign cooperation, and the construction was taken over by a Polish-French Consortium, founded specifically for this purpose.

⁶ Tadeusz Wenda, “Dzieje budowy portu gdyńskiego,” in: *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu*, ed. Aleksy Majewski (Gdynia: Instytut Wydawniczy Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1935), 63.

By 1926 the village transformed into a port town, with city rights granted on 10 February that year. International events helped the young port expand, especially the Polish–German customs war of 1925 and the British coalminers’ strike of 1926. The former prompted Poland to seek new markets for the export of its coal, and the latter prompted Scandinavian countries to seek new sources to import coal from, both of which resulted in Polish coal being exported via sea to Scandinavia, and, consequently, the rapid development of the port through which it was exported. By 1939 Gdynia was the biggest (measured in the volume of transshipments) and one of the most modern ports on the Baltic Sea, responsible for almost half of Poland’s foreign exchange.⁷

“Epos of concrete, symphony of siphons”

Achieving this development required, of course, tremendous effort. The construction was a great investment and considerable strain on the economy. In the country whose needs were many and resources few, to justify such spending on just one project, it was necessary that the hearts and minds of the nation were in it. It was, therefore, accompanied by intensive and enthusiastic propaganda. From early on, the construction of Gdynia was presented as opening a gateway or a window to the world – a widely used metaphor, which even still today is associated with Gdynia. Other metaphors relied on similar imagery of opening to the world, awareness of one’s global position, and of farsighted vision. Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski (1888–1974), the Minister of Industry and Trade between 1926 and 1930, deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Treasure between 1935 and 1939, and a great champion of the construction of Gdynia, is often attributed with a statement that “Gdańsk is still today, as it was said in Poland as early as the 16th century, the eye with which the Polish Crown looks at the world, but it is difficult to see with one eye, so it is better to look at the world with two.”⁸ Like an eye, Gdynia was to help the nation see the world; like a gateway, it was to provide a way out into the world; and like a window, it was to let in a breath of fresh air.

The media reported on the construction in enthusiastic tones on a regular basis. But it also became the inspiration for writers, poets, playwrights, movie directors, graphic designers and others, who devoted their talent and energies to the propaganda. The most notable among them was Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925), writer and publicist, Nobel prize candidate, whose 1922 novel *Wiatr od morza* (Wind from the sea) became one of the cornerstones of the Polish identification with the sea and the seacoast. In 1925 he exhorted writers and poets:

⁷ Wanda Czerwińska, “Narodziny portu,” in: *Dzieje Gdyni*, ed. Roman Wapiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1980), 37.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 35.

They will tell me, of course, that it is not the job and task of poets to build ports. But this port, its image, its indispensable necessity, its national vision must be forged in people's souls, carved in their hearts, chiselled in the granite of their will. [...] It needs to be built day and night by all lands and by the whole nation.⁹

Poets listened and responded with poems and prose. Dariusz Konstantynów, who analysed the interwar poetry about Gdynia, identified several recurring themes, the most interesting of which are the ones referring to the port's industrial landscape and the city's modernity. There were poems praising the port's machinery – harbour cranes and dredgers – and the modern materials from which it was built: concrete, steel, ferro-concrete.¹⁰ Poets, especially in the 1930s, wrote about “epos of concrete, symphony of siphons,”¹¹ “prayer of the roar of steel trowels and hammers,” but also about “tall transparent houses” and “cheerful, square churches”¹² – the modernist architecture that would define Gdynia's cityscape. Others pictured Poland as an organism, with Gdynia forming its vital organ: “dear aorta,” a lung, a windpipe, or an eye.¹³ The imagery not only presented it as something indispensable for the functioning of the organism, but – again – conveyed an image of opening: a breath of fresh air, being able to see the world.

Novels too spoke to the readers with earnestness and zeal, meant to evoke in them patriotic pride of independence and the nation's spectacular achievement that was the new port.¹⁴ So did the comparatively new medium of film: a 1935 movie *Rhapsody of the Baltic*, for example, included a dialogue between two major characters, navy officers, looking at the shore of Gdynia from an approaching ship and commenting, in a very serious tone:

“Look, what power emanates from Gdynia!”

“Do you remember how it looked like fifteen years ago?”

“And now...!”

⁹ Stefan Żeromski, “Port w Gdyni,” in: *Elegie i inne pisma literackie i społeczne*, ed. Waclaw Borowy (Warszawa, Kraków: Wydawnictwo J. Mortkowicza, 1928), 207.

¹⁰ Dariusz Konstantynów, “‘I słowo ukłękło przed czynem’. Obraz Gdyni w poezji dwudziestolecia międzywojennego,” in: *Polska nad Bałtykiem: Konstruowanie identyfikacji kulturowej państwa nad morzem 1918–1939*, eds. Dariusz Konstantynów and Małgorzata Omilanowska (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2012), 285.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 284.

¹² *Ibidem*, 289.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 280.

¹⁴ See: Hanna Faryna-Paszkiwicz, “Co każdy Polak o morzu wiedzieć powinien? O różnych środkach propagandy morza w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym,” in: *Polska nad Bałtykiem*, 23.

“Great effort of the nation has made this miracle happen. You know, I feel strangely moved when I look at this our only gateway to the world. And I think that the same must happen in the heart of every Pole.”¹⁵

Statements like these – whether penned by reporters in the press, poets in their verses or put into the mouths of characters in novels and films – contributed to the sense of agency that came to be one of the important elements of the Gdynia propaganda: its construction was presented as a collective effort of the whole nation, which built the sense of identification with the coast in general and Gdynia in particular, and pride of the construction.

Moreover, the propaganda went beyond the realm of the mass media – sometimes it became a lived experience. In 1932 the city became the stage of a new, spectacular holiday: Holiday of the Sea. The organiser was an organisation called the Maritime and Colonial League – which will be discussed in more detail in a later part of this article – and the initiator was most probably either Andrzej Wachowiak or Julian Rummel.¹⁶ Wachowiak (1892–1967) was a journalist and a maritime activist, member of the League; Rummel (1878–1954) was the head of its local branch and one of the prominent personages of interwar Gdynia, a marine engineer with experience in pre-war Russia, as the director of *Żegluga Polska* (the Polish state ship owning company) instrumental in the establishment of the Polish merchant fleet. In his later memoirs he wrote that for several years he had been thinking of “organising a big feast in Gdynia, modelled on the feasts held in various ports in Catholic countries, which attract hundreds of thousands of people.”¹⁷ The holiday took place in late July, around the time of the Feast of Saint Peter and Paul, patron saints of fishermen (which falls on 29 July). This first Holiday of the Sea was a very solemn event, and included an address by President Ignacy Mościcki and other distinguished guests, a Holy Mass, giving of an oath and a parade. Around 70,000–100,000 people arrived from all over Poland¹⁸ – they could easily come to Gdynia thanks to additional trains and discount train tickets introduced by the Ministry of Communication. The Mass and speeches were also broadcast on the Polish Radio.¹⁹ Although in subsequent years the Holidays of the Sea were celebrated in different towns and cities all over Poland and did not focus on Gdynia to this extent, being the only Polish port and the “gateway to the world” it still played a part.²⁰ For example, in 1933 the Maritime

¹⁵ Leonard Buczkowski (dir.), *Rapsodia Bałtyku*, 1935.

¹⁶ See discussion in: Jarosław Drozd, *Sojusz narodu polskiego z morzem: Święto Morza w Gdyni 1932–1939* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2021), 15–17.

¹⁷ Julian Rummel, *Narodziny żeglugi*, ed. Maciej Rdeśniński (Wspomnienia Ludzi Morza i Wybrzeża series, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1980), 253.

¹⁸ Drozd, *Sojusz narodu polskiego z morzem*, 25.

¹⁹ “Przebieg uroczystości,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 9/9 (September 1932): 9.

²⁰ Rummel, in his memoir, claimed that after 1932 the holiday was hijacked by the Maritime and Colonial League and lost its original character: “The League transformed this festival into

and Colonial League published a brochure with poems, songs and short plays that could be performed on the occasion, as well as slogans, which included: “The sea is a window to the world,” “The way to Poland’s greatness leads through the sea,” and “Gdynia is Poland’s larynx”(!).²¹

The quantity of the poetry, literature and other works on Gdynia, it has to be said, far exceeded their quality. As some of the examples above show, the thin line between pathos and the ridiculous was often crossed, and even though the exact placement of that line might be somewhat different for our modern ears than for the contemporaries, also for the latter the ubiquity of the propaganda and the repetitiveness of the imagery became, at times, irritating. From the mid-1930s on, the voices became more critical.²² But already in 1929, poet and columnist Antoni Słonimski declared sarcastically that he would precede all articles in his column in the literary magazine *Wiadomości Literackie* with an acronym “M.ż.G.s.r.” (“Mimo że Gdynia się rozbudowuje” – “Although Gdynia is expanding”). This, he claimed, was to counter some readers’ criticism that he only wrote about problematic issues (which, in the newly independent country, were many) and forgot about the achievements.²³ This satire revealed how ubiquitous the propaganda of Gdynia was – but also that by this time the imagery of the growing port and the language in which it was described was recognisable enough that it could serve as a *pars pro toto* for Poland’s modernisation and development. It referred to the mythical Gdynia which sometimes overshadowed the real city.

The discrepancy between the two Gdynias was also noticed, for example, by Józef Borowik (1891–1968), director of the Baltic Institute, a research institute focusing on maritime topics, questions of Polish access to the sea, and the Baltic Sea region.²⁴ In 1937 the same journal in which Słonimski had his column, *Wiadomości Literackie*, published a special number almost entirely devoted to Gdynia, in which – among the typically enthusiastic texts – there was one by Borowik. He called for a realistic look at Gdynia and the sea, focusing on the hard, often tedious work that they required, on analyses of the maritime economy etc., rather than grand deeds and poetic visions. “Can we forego the allure of great things, of epoch-making achievements, one-of-a-kind records?” he asked, before adding a criticism of his

a celebration actually intended to deify the sea, to pay homage to it, and there was now something pagan about it. In all the towns where there were branches of the League, processions were organised to whatever water was nearby, and celebrations were held. This was to the obvious detriment of Gdynia, and it completely distorted our thought. It also created the strange situation that the Holiday of the Sea was not held by the sea, and drew visitors away from Gdynia,” Rummel, *Narodziny żeglugi*, 254.

²¹ Andrzej Oracz, *Na Święto Morza: Przemówienie, Odczyt, Obrazek Sceniczny, Wybór Poezji i Pieśni* (Warszawa: Liga Morska i Kolonialna, 1933), 6–7.

²² Faryna-Paszkiewicz, “Co każdy Polak,” 24–25.

²³ Antoni Słonimski, “Kronika tygodniowa,” *Wiadomości Literackie* 23 (9 I 1929): 4.

²⁴ On the Baltic Institute see: Marta Grzechnik, *Regional histories and historical regions. The concept of the Baltic Sea region in Polish and Swedish historiographies* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 31–75.

countrymen’s desire for grandeur, even if only an apparent one: “We would rather measure our achievements by millions of tons (even if it were coal) than by kilograms of gold.”²⁵

Transformation: from land to maritime

There was a sense of urgency behind both the building of the port and its promotion. In great part, it followed from the geopolitical context. As I mentioned before, Poland’s shape determined at Versailles gave the country only a narrow access to the sea. It was, furthermore, flanked on both sides by German lands: the territory of Germany proper to the west and its enclave, East Prussia, to the east. In Germany, this solution was perceived as painful and unfair: not only did the Germans feel robbed of a part of their territory, but also split in two by a strip of Polish territory. This fuelled revisionist sentiments in Germany, where the borders established at Versailles were contested, and the notion of the Polish access to the sea as an “unnatural” corridor – the so-called Polish or Danzig Corridor – was promoted internationally. On the Polish side, the Baltic Institute, for example, responded with their critical discussion of the German “corridor propaganda,” both in Polish and in Western European languages, and calling out the term “corridor” itself as a creation of the German propaganda.²⁶

The Polish maritime policy, including the construction of the seaport, was thus inevitably shaped by the context of Polish-German relations. The construction of Gdynia was conceived for both military security and economic competitiveness in the Baltic Sea region. In both these terms, Germany and German-dominated Danzig (which was often treated as the same thing, or “in fact nothing more than an outpost of aggressive German action to regain the “lost provinces” with the further aim of destroying Poland,” as Julian Rummel put it²⁷) were the main adversaries: the threat to the borders and to the economy of Poland. The seriousness of this threat was driven home by the already mentioned events in the 1920s: the blockade of the military supplies in Danzig in 1920, and the Polish-German customs war of 1925 (when the German government raised custom duties on Polish imports, most notably coal, in the hope of ruining the Polish economy and, as a result, bringing about the collapse of the Polish state). As could be expected from this context, neither the Germans in Germany proper nor the Danzigers welcomed the construction of Gdynia. Already in 1926 Rummel predicted that

²⁵ Józef Borowik, “Spojrzenie na Bałtyk,” *Wiadomości Literackie* 27 (17 I 1937): 6.

²⁶ E.g., *Przeciw propagandzie korytarzowej*, ed. Józef Borowik (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Bałtyckiego, 1930); Kazimierz Smogorzewski, *Poland’s Access to the Sea* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1934). See also: Grzechnik, *Regional histories*, 54–56.

²⁷ Julian Rummel, *Morskie zagadnienia Polski* (Gdynia: Nakładem Instytutu Wydawniczego Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1934), 2.

the Germans would try to fight against the construction of Gdynia.²⁸ And fight they did: at first mocking it as an impossible, unrealistic project, and then, as it became clear that it was, in fact, both feasible and quite likely, criticising it for creating competition for Danzig. In May 1930, Danzig filed a complaint with the High Commissioner of the League of Nations, demanding the closing of the port in Gdynia and giving Danzig the monopoly on Polish maritime trade. The complaint was sent back and forth several times between the High Commissioner, the League's Council and the Committee of Experts for the next two years. Finally, it was resolved when the Polish government signed an agreement directly with the Free City of Danzig on 5 August 1933. Poland promised to use the port in Danzig, and the latter to cooperate with the Polish government when it came to maritime trade, as well as to safeguard the rights of the Polish citizens living in the Free City.²⁹

Apart from the very pragmatic aspect of military and economic security, the construction of Gdynia had also a strong ideological dimension, again showing the presence of the two Gdynias. Part of it followed from the feeling that Poles did not identify with the seaside region of Pomerania as much as they should: it was not present on the Polish mental maps as much as other regions of Poland. In connection with the German revisionist "corridor propaganda," this was a threat to the Polish rule over Pomerania. Therefore, the propaganda of Gdynia, the sense of agency of the whole nation in its construction that it conveyed, aimed, among others, to create the sense of identification both with the port city and the whole region around it. Historical arguments were also used, aiming to prove the perennial Slavic character of the region, and to present the Germans as alien invaders. Such was the message of both literature – for example Żeromski's *Wiatr od morza* – and scholarship. The latter most notably published by the Baltic Institute, whose scholars, including especially historians, argued that the shores of the Baltic Sea had been inhabited by Slavs as far back as the Middle Ages and antiquity, the confirmation of which could allegedly be found in the oldest written sources, e.g. Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, Ptolemy.³⁰ This argument was aimed against the German historiography,

²⁸ Julian Rummel, *Gdynia – port polski* (Toruń 1926), 47.

²⁹ Alfred Siebeneichen and Henryk Strasburger, *Spór o Gdynię* (Wydawnictwa Instytutu Bałtyckiego, vol. 3, Toruń, Warszawa: Instytut Bałtycki, Gebethner i Wolff, 1930); Alfred Siebeneichen, "Rola Gdańska w życiu gospodarczym Polski," in: *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu*, ed. Aleksy Majewski (Gdynia: Instytut Wydawniczy Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1935), 329–330. See also: Stanisław Mikos, *Wolne Miasto Gdańsk a Liga Narodów: 1920–1939* (Seria Monografii Pomorskich, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979), 240–45.

³⁰ Józef Widajewicz, "Słowianie zachodni na Bałtyku," in: *Światopogląd morski*, ed. Józef Borowik (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Bałtyckiego, 1934), 20–21. See also other essays in the same volume: Kazimierz Tymieniecki, "Dziejowy stosunek Polaków do morza," in: *Światopogląd morski*, 48–75; Zygmunt Wojciechowski, "Rozwój terytorialny Prus w stosunku do ziem macierzystych Polski," in: *Światopogląd morski*, 93–134. In the latter text Wojciechowski presented his theory of "homelands of Poland" (which included, among others, Pomerania with the estuaries of Vistula and Oder). He would develop it and present in more detail in his post-Second World War publications,

which on its part promoted the thesis of a “Germanic sea,” that is to say, the historic domination of the Germans on the Baltic Sea.³¹

The lack of identification was connected to yet another matter: Poland had not been, historically, a maritime nation. Even though the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had access to the sea (and for a time two seas), the attitude of the Polish nobles, the dominant stratum in the society, followed a dictum by a famous 16th century poet, Sebastian Fabian Klonowic: “A Pole does not have to know the sea, when he is a diligent ploughman.”³² Poles were traditionally a nation of peasants, farmers and landowners, not sailors. They were familiar neither with the sea, the work in occupations related to maritime economy, nor with maritime customs and laws. They did not even have the language to talk about the sea and sailing: the Polish language lacked maritime vocabulary, and throughout the interwar period efforts were made to create one.³³ Julian Rummel described the widespread ignorance in his memoirs – for example, he had to explain to Polish dignitaries what it meant for a ship to sail under a national flag, when they claimed an American ship they visited as guests to be Polish on the grounds that it had a Polish flag displayed somewhere on board.³⁴ Many texts in the press, specialist journals and others, began with a statement of lamentable fact: we, as a nation, are not familiar with the sea.

These texts were, at the same time, calls to action to change this regrettable situation. The work to be done was not only about learning the trade and the right words, however. Not either about quite literally familiarising Poles with the sea, to which purpose they were encouraged to visit the seaside, for example by special discounts at the railways and trips organised by the Maritime and River (later Colonial) League. Much more than that, the work to be done was to lay the grounds for a transformation from the nation of peasants and farmers into the nation of seafarers and sailors, a major shift in the national psyche. The idea behind this transformation was that of land and sea cultures, as discussed for example

e.g.: Zygmun Wojciechowski, “Poland and Germany. Ten Centuries of Struggle,” in: *Poland’s Place in Europe*, ed. Zygmun Wojciechowski (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1947), 85–316. See also: Marta Grzechnik, “‘Recovering’ Territories: The use of history in the integration of the new Polish western borderland after World War II,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69/4 (2017): 675–678, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1297386>.

³¹ Jörg Hackmann and Robert Schweitzer, “Introduction: North Eastern Europe as a Historical Region,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 33/4 (December 2002): 362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770200000161>; Szczerski, *Modernizacja*, 206.

³² “Może nie wiedzieć Polak co morze, gdy pilnie orze,” Sebastian Fabian Klonowic, *Flis: to jest spuszczenie statków Wisłą i innymi rzekami do niej przypadającymi* (Chełmno: Nakł. i czcionkami Józefa Gólkowskiego, 1862), 11.

³³ See: Leon Roppel, *Przegląd Historycznych Prac Nad Polskim Słownictwem Morskim w Latach 1899–1939* (Prace i Materiały z Zakresu Polskiego Słownictwa Morskiego, no. 1, Gdańsk: Zakład im. Ossolińskich we Wrocławiu, 1955).

³⁴ Rummel, *Narodziny żeglugi*, 25.

in the scholarship of the Baltic Institute. Its flagship publication, an anthology under the telling title *Światopogląd morski* (Maritime Outlook), opens with an essay – a transcript of a lecture – by historian Franciszek Bujak called “Kultury morskie i lądowe” – Sea and Land Cultures. Land cultures, according to Bujak, were “cultural cripples,” whose “inescapable fate was dependence and poverty.”³⁵ Sea cultures, by contrast, were cultures of movement: dynamic, innovative, enterprising, confident and patriotic.³⁶ Poland had been a land culture in the past, which had brought its downfall in the 18th century – an argument that was common not only among the Baltic Institute researchers, but it was more or less an established consensus among people who dealt with the matters of the sea, either on a daily basis (Rummel), as part of their political programme (Minister Kwiatkowski) or occasionally (President Stanisław Wojciechowski, in a speech he gave when visiting Gdynia in 1923).³⁷

There was, again, an element of Polish-German rivalry here. One of the German arguments against the “Polish corridor” was that Poles – and Slavs in general – had always been a land culture. They therefore neither needed access to the sea, nor would they know what to do with it when it was granted. For trade, they could just as well use the ports of other nations – that is, in practice, Germans. To this, Gdynia was a poignant answer, a visible proof that the Poles did, in fact, know what to do with their newly acquired access to the sea, or as it was often phrased by the contemporaries, that they knew how to “cultivate the sea.”

The future towards which the constructors of Gdynia and its propagandists looked was to be a future of Poles as a sea culture, Poles as daring, entrepreneurial, far-sighted – just as the construction of the new seaport, the gateway to the world, itself was. This would become the way to Poland’s future welfare. “I would also like Polish society to realise,” Rummel wrote in 1926, “that the day the Port of Gdynia [...] starts functioning regularly, Poland will enter a new period of its existence, as the source of its wealth and power lies at sea.”³⁸

Modernisation

There was another aspect of this ideological construction of Gdynia: it was also an important modernising project. Not only was it proof that Poles could overcome

³⁵ Franciszek Bujak, “Kultury morskie i lądowe,” in: *Światopogląd morski*, 18.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 5.

³⁷ E.g., Julian Rummel, *Państwo a morze* (Poznań: Liga Morska i Rzeczna, 1925), 10; Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, “O światopogląd morski w Polsce dawnej i współczesnej,” in: *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu*, ed. Aleksy Majewski (Gdynia: Instytut Wydawniczy Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1935), 9–16; *Ku morzu: jednodniówka Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej*, ed. Radosław Wincenty Andrzej Krajewski (Warszawa: Liga Morska i Rzeczna, 1924), 1–2.

³⁸ Rummel, *Gdynia*, viii.

their land-based nature and learn to cultivate the sea, it was also, just as much, proof that they could overcome the backwardness of the economy and the society. Poland struggled with economic problems stemming, among other factors, from over a century of foreign domination, the challenges of integrating into one system the regions that had until recently been under the rule of three different empires, therefore having very diverse economic, social, political structures, to which added the destruction of the First World War and the economic crises of the interwar period. When the new shape of Europe was being decided at the Versailles peace conference, for many contemporary Europeans granting independence to Central and Eastern European nations was an irresponsible experiment. Some called it, contemptuously, “Balkanisation,” some called the newly independent countries “seasonal states,” some suggested at Versailles that they should be run as mandates, just as the former German and Ottoman colonies overseas.³⁹ Far from being welcomed into the international community with open arms, Polish independence was often met with a mixture of contempt and disbelief.⁴⁰

Poland was a predominantly agrarian country, with few industries.⁴¹ Gdynia was, however, an attempt to overcome this, as one of the two interwar Poland’s major successful industrialising projects – the other one being the Central Industrial District – and as such it was a testament to the nation’s ability to adapt to the modern age. It was to prove to the sceptics abroad that it was worthy of independence and mature enough to run a modern state. It was, at the same time, meant to teach the Poles themselves modernity. The modernity of Gdynia was juxtaposed against the ancient Danzig, whose port, originally Mediaeval, was “old, badly arranged, poorly equipped and badly maintained,” according to Rummel⁴² – as opposed to Tadeusz Wenda’s modern design.

Gdynia was one of the several modernising projects in Central Eastern Europe in the interwar period, the region whose aspiration was to lift itself up from the continent’s margin closer to its core, where its nations could take their place as modern European nations. As art historian Andrzej Szczerski argues, Gdynia had a special

³⁹ In particular the South African statesman Jan Smuts, see: Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge–London) The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 444. On “Balkanisation” see: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33–35.

⁴⁰ See: Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 291.

⁴¹ Interestingly, its main industrial district, Silesia, was just as Pomerania a former German territory and the object of German revisionism. As the region was the source of the Polish coal, exported abroad via Gdynia, in propaganda the regions were often linked into one “system,” crucial for Polish economic sustainability. E.g. the journal *Morze*, published by the Maritime and Colonial League, declared in 1937: “Poland’s economic independence is supported by the Katowice-Gdynia line connecting our two regions: Silesia and Pomerania,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 14/7 (July 1937): 1.

⁴² Rummel, *Gdynia*, 105.

place among these projects, as it became the gateway to the world not only for Poland but for the whole region.⁴³ It became a competition for the ports traditionally serving the region: the German ports and Trieste. Contemporaries, like for example Józef Borowik in his publication about Gdynia from 1934, argued that Gdynia's advantageous position made it a natural hub for transit between the Danube and the Balkan regions on one side, and the Baltic and North Sea regions, including Scandinavia, and even North America, on the other. Its hinterland, as visualised on maps in contemporary publications about Gdynia, reached as far south as the Danube region and the Balkans, and the basins of the Black and the Aegean Seas.⁴⁴

The idea of modernisation was connected to the idea of maritimity: the whole project of turning Poles into the nation of sailors was the project of transforming them into a modern nation; a sea nation that was not only a nation that sailed, but also one that was innovative, progressive and far-sighted. The modernisation was to create a new type of citizen, "a new, pioneering type of Pole, conqueror of seas and oceans, mosquitos and malaria," in the words of Michał Pankiewicz, member of the Maritime and Colonial League.⁴⁵ The modernising aspect spoke even through the city's very appearance: its centre, especially in the second half of the 1930s, was built predominantly in the style of modernism. It had the advantage of being comparatively cheap, but also its clear, simple lines suited perfectly to express the idea of progress. In its Gdynia examples, the style often referred to the sea and ships: buildings had rounded corners and balconies, elements resembling captain's bridges and other elements of ships, especially ocean liners. The association of Gdynia with modernisation was also conveyed in literature and visual arts, as visible from the examples of poetry quoted earlier in this article and the movie *Rhapsody of the Baltic*, of which Gdynia, it could be argued, was one of the main characters. It presented the city as modern and dynamic – its female characters, for instance, were emancipated, driving their own cars and behaving in a confident, independent manner towards men. That Gdynia became synonymous with the modern way of living was also visible in slogans such as one printed in *Wiadomości Literackie*, saying: "What Gdynia is to Poland, the electrified flat is to modern man!" which was accompanied by a picture of a harbour quay with cranes and ships, surrounded by various electrical home appliances.⁴⁶

⁴³ Andrzej Szczerski, "Gdynia – brama na świat Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej," in: *Polska nad Bałtykiem*, 152.

⁴⁴ Józef Borowik, *Gdynia – Port Rzeczypospolitej*, 3rd ed. (Biblioteczka Bałtycka, Toruń: Instytut Bałtycki, 1934), 26–27; Bolesław Koselnik, "Zagadnienie tranzytu w portach polskich," in: *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu*, ed. Aleksy Majewski (Gdynia: Instytut Wydawniczy Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1935), 137–139.

⁴⁵ Michał Pankiewicz, "Niezlomny pionier Polski kolonialnej," *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 13/9 (September 1936): 17.

⁴⁶ "Czym dla Polski Gdynia... tym dla nowoczesnego człowieka zelektryfikowanie mieszkanie!," *Wiadomości Literackie* 27 (17 I 1937): 31.

By its very nature, the construction of Gdynia was from the start a future-oriented endeavour; it was accompanied by visions of what it would become in the future near and far. In his 1926 book on Gdynia, Rummel outlined a plan of how the future city – its centre and residential districts – should be built. It would, he wrote, become “the façade of the Polish Republic,” therefore it “should meet certain aesthetic requirements.”⁴⁷ Almost ten years later, in 1934, he wrote a brochure, published by a local tourist association, called *Sen o Gdyni* (Dream of Gdynia). The titular dream was a vision of Gdynia in twenty years’ time, i.e., in the 1950s. This Gdynia of the 1950s was to be a modern, functional, aesthetically pleasing city equipped with an underground, a system of bicycle paths and an airport. It was to be a city of half a million inhabitants, racially and religiously diverse, whose “daily contact with the world, daily interaction with foreigners,” as well as their own nationally and racially diverse backgrounds and “the climate and constant contact with the sea” shaped them into “the type of people who are capable, hard-working, brave and helpful [...] people who are silent, bold, confident but not conceited, broad-minded, capable of measuring phenomena on a reasonable scale, well-versed in international life, and usually highly-specialised professionals.”⁴⁸ In other words, the people of Gdynia, Rummel imagined, would become the maritime people *par excellence*, and citizens of the world, capable of making use of the world’s resources.

But there were visions of more distant future, too, revealing aspirations of what Gdynia was expected – dreamt – to become. In 1937, the literary magazine *Wiadomości Literackie* printed a picture titled “Gdynia in the year 2000,” presenting a future waterfront resembling that of New York in the 1930s, with an ocean liner approaching the shore.⁴⁹ On the one hand, it showed the aspiration: United States as the model, its level and speed of development as the end goal (the quick tempo in which Gdynia was constructed was indeed sometimes called “American speed”). On the other, it also showed the limits to the author’s imagination: even though he reached six decades into the future, he imagined it as the present, only bigger and better, with the same architectural style and ocean liners still crossing the seas.

As ambitious as these visions were, as enthusiastic the propaganda of Gdynia as the symbol of modernisation, the reality did not always live up to them. While the port was from the start carefully and purposefully planned, the city was left to spontaneous, uncontrolled and unplanned growth. It was not until several years into the construction (1926) that any urban planning started curbing the spontaneous endeavours of individual entrepreneurs and the ever-growing crowds of incoming settlers (by 1927 Gdynia had 13 thousand inhabitants).⁵⁰ Some

⁴⁷ Rummel, *Gdynia*, 174.

⁴⁸ Julian Rummel, *Sen o Gdyni* (Gdynia: Gdyński Związek Propagandy Turystycznej, 1934), 20–21.

⁴⁹ *Gdynia – dzieło otwarte*, eds. Jacek Friedrich, Anna Śliwa (Gdynia: Muzeum Miasta Gdyni, 2017), 335.

⁵⁰ The growth was not only due to the incoming settlers, but also incorporating the neighbouring villages into the city. Szczerski, *Modernizacje*, 210–211; Mieczysław Widernik, “Powstanie

of the problems that the young city faced from the beginning were connected with the fact that the port was given priority both in planning, land ownership and financing, as well as lack of foresight which led to underestimation of the port's scale and economic importance which made it a major urban centre. This was pointed out, among others, by Franciszek Sokół (1890–1956), the Government Commissioner in Gdynia from 1933 until the outbreak of the war.⁵¹ As a result, interwar Gdynia faced a major housing problem, one of the most acute in Poland: the city was unable to meet the needs of the ever-growing population.⁵² In the suburbs, but sometimes even in the city centre, settlements were built illegally, with no urban planning and no amenities. According to Sokół, at the end of 1934, 73% of all the residential buildings in Gdynia were what he called “barrack buildings,” i.e., barracks and sheds built from whatever materials people had at hand, which, he estimated, meant that 65% of Gdynia's working class, or 20 000 people, lived in such buildings, “in the most unhygienic conditions imaginable.”⁵³

At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s housing cooperatives were established, which started to build cheap residential blocks and houses, and in 1933 a Project Bureau at the Government Commissioner's Office was established.⁵⁴ But still in 1937, in the already mentioned special number of the magazine *Wiadomości Literackie*, there appeared an article by writer Zbigniew Uniłowski, in which he described the desperate poverty and squalor of the unemployed inhabiting the city's suburbs, as well as the horrific working and living conditions on the merchant ships. “I would like to say to the citizens,” he concluded,

who are sleeping sweetly with optimism, that the purpose of Gdynia is indeed great, but that not everything is in order, that the singing procession needs to stop and the inside needs to be patched up. I am afraid that the procession is getting a little distracted; that you have sung your praises and now want to leave Gdynia on its own.⁵⁵

Global ambitions – global recognition

There is a picture from a march organised in 1939 in Toruń in which we can see men carrying a banner with the slogan, “Gdynia dowodem mocarstwowej dojrzałości”: Gdynia – proof of imperial maturity. The phrase “imperial maturity” conveyed two things about the way in which the construction of Gdynia was

i rozwój miasta,” in: *Dzieje Gdyni*, ed. Roman Wapiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, 1980), 75–78.

⁵¹ Franciszek Sokół, “Miasto Gdynia,” in: *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu*, ed. Aleksy Majewski (Gdynia: Instytut Wydawniczy Państwowej Szkoły Morskiej, 1935), 247–248.

⁵² Widernik, “Powstanie i rozwój miasta,” 82–87.

⁵³ Sokół, “Miasto Gdynia,” 253.

⁵⁴ Szczerski, *Modernizacje*, 227–228; Widernik, “Powstanie i rozwój miasta,” 86–87.

⁵⁵ Zbigniew Uniłowski, “Gdynia na co dzień,” *Wiadomości Literackie* 27 (17 I 1937): 16.

understood. Firstly, that the nation capable of such a feat had proved to be worthy of its independence, equal to its Western neighbours, and not just a “seasonal state.” “It is no exaggeration to say,” Rummel had stated in 1926, “that the whole world will be interested in the progress of work in Gdynia and will form their opinion of Poland according to our progress there.”⁵⁶ The “imperial maturity” supposedly achieved by 1939 and evidenced by Gdynia’s success, meant that the opinions of “the whole world” could only be positive. It was the counterargument against those who had doubted that the creation of the new states in Central Eastern Europe after the breakup of the pre-First World War empires had been a good idea, that they would be capable of governing themselves.

Secondly, “imperial maturity” implied that its ambitions did not stop there, but went further, onto the seas and oceans of the world, and into overseas territories. It envisaged a network of trade connections with the whole world, seafaring, and colonies in Africa and South America. The sea was to be a way to build a strong state, or even an empire with an overseas presence. The gateway opened and connected Poland to the whole world. “Here Poland has no borders,” President Stanisław Wojciechowski declared in a speech made in Gdynia on 29 April 1923, “from here the Polish flag can fly freely to the wide world, wherever a Polish sailor wishes to lead it in the service of the homeland.”⁵⁷ The Polish-German customs war of 1925 showed how precious such metaphorical lack of borders could be, which enabled seeking new trade partners without the need to cross land borders into neighbouring countries with their customs and their economic policies – through the sea and its own port, Poland became neighbours with the whole world. Ten years later, in the monumental publication *XV lat polskiej pracy na morzu* (Fifteen years of Polish work on the sea), Minister Kwiatkowski called for a 90 degrees turn of the Polish trade policy, from the east-west axis to the north-south one, a turn that was facilitated by Gdynia serving as the port for its East Central European neighbours to the south, as described earlier.⁵⁸ The sea was the way for Poland to escape its historically problematic position between Germany and Russia/USSR, to expand beyond its local context and put itself in the global one, in which it had “no borders.”⁵⁹

The organiser of the 1939 march was the Maritime and Colonial League (before 1930 known as Maritime and River League). As its name indicates, it was interested in questions of the sea and of colonial expansion, and it was responsible for a great part of the maritime propaganda centring around the city and port of Gdynia. Its most important journal and the main channel of its propaganda was called *Morze* – Sea – and right from the very first number,

⁵⁶ Rummel, *Gdynia*, 180.

⁵⁷ Krajewski, *Ku morzu*, 1.

⁵⁸ Kwiatkowski, “O światopogląd morski,” 14.

⁵⁹ See: Szczerski, “Gdynia – brama na świat,” 151.

in November 1924, it printed photographs of growing Gdynia, articles about the necessity of possessing Poland's own port, and of developing the merchant fleet.⁶⁰ A special number of *Morze* from September 1926 contained a series of articles – some of them in English – presenting the progress of the construction and statistics for both Gdynia and Danzig as well as numbers relating to the exports of various goods. *Morze* also printed enthusiastic reports from the excursions to the seaside arranged by the League, as well as from the Holidays of the Sea, of which the League was the organiser. As the League changed its name from Maritime and River League to Maritime and Colonial League, thereby declaring its programme of overseas expansion, it argued that this was but the logical next step after the acquisition of the seacoast and the building of the port, the next step in the evolution from a land into a maritime nation. That Poland, thanks to Gdynia, was neighbours with the whole world and had “no borders,” was also understood as participation in colonial markets and settlement in overseas territories.

The article “Gdynia and Colonies” printed in *Morze* in 1936, when the construction of the port was already advanced and it was established as one of the important ports on the Baltic Sea, argued that Gdynia was the factor that taught Poles to think globally:

Gdynia made us realise that we have become co-owners of the seas.

Gdynia made us leave the narrow borders of our country and seek income and a foothold overseas.

Gdynia made us aware that we are not inferior to other nations in our overseas endeavours [...].

Gdynia opened our eyes to the vast possibilities and perspectives, broadened our horizons, made us change our strictly continental mentality into a universal one, encompassing all oceans and all lands.⁶¹

A similar sentiment was expressed visually by a postcard *Nasze wrota* (Our gate) designed in the 1930s by Bohdan Nowak for an exhibition organised by the Maritime and Colonial League and also printed in *Morze*. The postcard was part of a series *Nasze morze* (Our Sea). It shows a three-mast ship sailing out of a port, under an arch of a rainbow – symbol of Divine Providence – towards the horizon on which a symbolic gate opens in the sky, adorned with the Polish coat of arms, to reveal an exotic jungle.

⁶⁰ Piotr Bomas, “Dlaczego Polsce jest potrzebny port własny,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej* 1/1 (November 1924): 4–5; Feliks Rostkowski, “Budujmy flotę handlową,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej* 1/1 (November 1924): 3.

⁶¹ Kazimierz Jeziorański, “Gdynia a kolonie,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 13/1 (January 1936): 14.

Ships were, of course, another way in which Gdynia opened for Poland a gate to the world. Although their acquisition was a costly and sometimes difficult process (just as with other aspects of the Polish maritimity, there was little experience and few resources), or maybe just because of that, they became the materials signs of Poland's global presence, and as such, some of them served as floating embassies of Poland. The three-mast ship from Nowak's postcard, for example, could remind the viewers of *Dar Pomorza*, the training ship of the State Maritime School in Gdynia (today Gdynia Maritime University), purchased thanks to public collection of funds and proudly flying the Polish flag on the oceans and in ports around the globe during its journey around the world in 1934–1935. But not only did it fly the Polish flag, including in many places where it had not been seen before, it also helped spread the name of its home port, Gdynia. The chronicler of the journey, Captain Stanisław Kosko, commented in an article written in Hong Kong and printed in *Morze*: "Gdynia is already known here today. In the shipping section of the local magazines, registering ships coming or going to such ports as London, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg and Marseille, you will find it every day."⁶²

Other such floating embassies were ocean liners, especially *M/S Piłsudski* and *M/S Batory*, built in the Italian shipyard Monfalcone and launched in 1935 and 1936 respectively. Poland's own ocean liners were to help establish direct ways overseas for Polish travellers, tourists and emigrants, that would free them from the necessity of using the ports of other nations, usually Hamburg and Bremerhaven in Germany, and foreign nations' shipping companies, thus keeping the income in Poland. The paradox of this was that many passengers using the liners were emigrants, migrating mostly to the Americas, which could hardly be considered a source of pride or prestige for the nation from which so many emigrated. This was to change with the construction of *Piłsudski* and *Batory*, whose primary task was to be tourism, not shipping emigrants. In their design, nothing was left to chance: their interior and equipment, furniture, art displayed inside, crockery, cutlery and menus, etc. were carefully designed, under leadership of a special commission, by Polish artists and manufactured by Polish manufacturers.⁶³ The eminent Polish painter Wojciech Kossak (1856–1942), when sharing his impressions from a journey on *Batory* with the readers of *Wiadomości Literackie* in 1936, praised the artists who painted the pictures adorning the ship's interiors, writing that they "fulfilled their task [...] admirably."⁶⁴ Of the total of seven Polish ocean liners operating in the interwar period, it was *Batory* that

⁶² Stanisław Kosko, "W portach Azji," *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12/12 (December 1935): 24.

⁶³ Anna Kostrzyńska-Miłosz, "Transatlantyki narzędziem propagandy Polski na morzu," in: *Pol-ska nad Bałtykiem*, 70–81.

⁶⁴ Wojciech Kossak, "Pierwsze wrażenie z Batorego," *Wiadomości Literackie* 27 (21 VI 1936): 3.

went down in Polish popular culture as another symbol of Poland's maritime and global ambitions, inseparably connected with its home port, Gdynia: another window out into the world.⁶⁵

To some, the ships were another step in Poland coming to its own on the sea-coast and globally, just as Gdynia had been, and a proof that Poles could overcome their land nature and operate modern shipping lines. "In 1920, they claimed that we had no use for the sea because we could do nothing about it." Julian Ginsbert, member of the Maritime and Colonial League and Navy officer wrote in *Morze*,

In 1925, they claimed that Gdynia was money thrown into the seaside swamp. In 1930, when Gdynia was already an important European port, they claimed that we were unable to organise and operate our own shipping. In 1931, they were still laughing at the idea of establishing the Gdynia–America line. When the line conquered the Atlantic for Poland and the horn of the *Polonia* sounded at Ellis Island, they again said that our ships were old, slow and uncomfortable and would have to be withdrawn any day now.⁶⁶

"They" that Ginsbert referred to were critics and "pessimists," who questioned the building of the ocean liners, the necessity of their construction in the first place, Poland's readiness to operate them, and finally their sizes. "They," in other words, were land people, lacking vision.

Conclusions

When Ian Fleming was writing *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* in the early 1960s, *Batory* was still in operation, running the route between Gdynia and Canada. He might have heard about its home port, or just picked up the name at random from an atlas. The fact that he thought it a suitable place of birth not only of Blofeld himself, but also his parents, shows that it probably evoked, for him, an image of a cosmopolitan port city, where people of different nationalities

⁶⁵ Although the ship was decommissioned in 1971, the fascination with *Batory* has not disappeared. For example, when Emigration Museum launched in 2015 in Gdynia (hosted in the building of the former Marine Station from 1933, the starting point of the ocean liners' journeys in the past), one of the most advertised showpieces of the exhibition was "the world's largest model of a passenger ship" – a model of *Batory*. This was accompanied by popular publications about the ship and even a boardgame. See: Grzegorz Rogowski, *Pod polską banderą przez Atlantyki: m/s "Piłsudski" i m/s "Batory"* (Warszawa: Sport i Turystyka – Muza SA, 2015); Bożena Aksamit, *Batory: gwiazdy, skandale i miłość na transatlantyku* (Warszawa: Agora, 2015); "Permanent Exhibition," Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni, <https://polska1.pl/en/exhibitions/permanent-exhibition/>, accessed on 14 V 2021; "Emigration Museum Has Released a Detective Game!," Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni, 2017, https://polska1.pl/en/emigration_museum_has_released_a_detective_game/, accessed on 14 V 2021.

⁶⁶ Julian Ginsbert, "Polska bandera na Atlantyku," *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12/8–9 (August 1935): 19.

and cultures mixed, not unlike in Julian Rummel's "dream of Gdynia." In a way, in Fleming's fiction the city became what its constructors and champions had wanted it to be, closer to the mythical Gdynia than the real one.

As the examples discussed in this article show, the city and its image were both, in a way, consistent and full of paradoxes. They were consistent in the sense that the many aspects of the image – or the myth – of Gdynia combined into a holistic vision. The maritimism, far-sighted vision, modernisation, progress, and global presence were various aspects of the same idea, which completed each other into the proof of Poland's maturity as a modern European nation, worthy of independence and equal treatment by its Western neighbours.

They were, on the other hand, full of paradoxes in that the reality did not always live up to the myth. The modernity and progress expressed in the downtown's cityscape, in the newly constructed port, and finally in the image created in various media, existed side by side with the workers' primitive living conditions, unemployment, the mistakes made in the early stages of the city's development, not to mention the fact that the rest of Poland did not develop in the same modern tempo, and was still ridden with social and economic problems – to use Słonimski's satire, m.ż.G.s.r.

The pragmatic also clashed with the ideal, as was visible, for example, in Józef Borowik exasperated tone in his 1937 article in *Wiadomości Literackie*. But despite the often heavy-handed metaphors, the pathos and the overwhelming enthusiasm of Gdynia's propagandists, it is worth remembering that it *was* still very much a pragmatic project. As Szczerski put it: "The construction of Gdynia can be considered the boldest modernising project of the interwar period in the whole region of East Central Europe, emphasising contemporary ambitions and drives to modern reforms that were not utopian, but a pragmatic and practical call to action."⁶⁷ Not only was the project pragmatic, it was also, despite all the shortcomings, successful – the growth of the port, the transshipments, its role in international trade not only of Poland, but also neighbouring states such as Czechoslovakia, were not inventions of the propaganda but facts.

On the other hand, the creation of the myth turned out to be surprisingly long-lived too. In the twenty first century, Gdynia – although it no longer is Poland's only gateway to the world, but one of three major ports – tends to land high positions on surveys measuring its inhabitants' quality of life, both domestically and internationally, the fact which never fails to be widely advertised by the city's marketing department.⁶⁸ The city's mayor, Wojciech Szczurek, has been repeatedly

⁶⁷ Szczerski, "Gdynia – brama na świat," 153.

⁶⁸ E.g.: Redakcja portalu Gdynia.pl, "Gdynia z nagrodą za jakość życia," Oficjalny serwis internetowy miasta Gdynia, 2019, https://www.gdynia.pl/co-nowego,2774/gdynia-z-nagroda-za-jakosc-zycia,545409?fbclid=IwAR3Qh-09c1WLZQ_7SNL6zCbqxmocKvFAMhe3VJcW4jF3mW4VSSXgeU1c8Z4, accessed on 2 I 2022; Zuzanna Kasprzyk, "Gdynia z międzynarodową nagrodą za jakość życia,"

re-elected (in the last elections, in 2018, receiving 67.88%, which was a decrease in comparison to the earlier years, when his results hovered around 80% or more⁶⁹) and has occupied the post continuously since 1998. As political scientist Michał Graban points out, this might to some extent be due to a self-perpetuating mechanism, in which the positive feelings of the majority influence the feelings of an individual.⁷⁰ According to him, “the civic awareness shaped [in the interwar period] is carried over to our contemporary times, which inherit the level of optimism of pre-war Gdynia’s citizens, as confirmed by numerous surveys and election preference results. In this way, a cluster of concepts is formed in the citizen of Gdynia, compiling past and present times as one synonym of success and happiness.”⁷¹

Finally, Gdynia was also a city on and of borderland. It was quite literally situated next to the border with the Free City of Danzig, in the so-called Corridor – the borderland with Germany and its East Prussian enclave – and on the territory of a minority within the Polish state, the Kashubians. It also came into being on the border between the land and the sea. These features defined its construction, purpose and existence in the interwar period: the competition with Danzig, the Polish-German relations, the access to and cultivation of the sea. But it was also meant to be an opening or erasure of the border between Poland and the rest of the world: “here Poland has no borders,” as President Wojciechowski said. After all, what is a gateway if not both a marker of a border and a point of its crossing?

Oficjalny serwis internetowy miasta Gdynia, 2021, <https://www.gdynia.pl/gdynia-innowacyjna,7581/gdynia-z-miedzynarodowa-nagroda-za-jakosc-zycia,561979>, accessed on 2 I 2022.

⁶⁹ “Wybory Samorządowe 2018,” Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2018, https://wybory2018.pkw.gov.pl/pl/geografia/226200#results_vote_elect_mayor_round_1, accessed on 2 I 2022.

⁷⁰ Michał Graban, “Mit sukcesu – jako spoiwo tożsamości Gdyni,” *Zeszyty Gdynińskie. Tożsamość kulturowo-cywilizacyjna Gdyni* 11 (2016): 35.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 37.